

Spatial Narrative and Critique of Reality in The American Film “*Breaking*”



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ABSTRACT: The American film and television production “*Breaking*” (originally titled 892) is an independent film of a documentary nature. Through the experience of a veteran, the film reveals the tragedy under the illusion of so-called fairness and justice in American society. The stark social realism is the biggest highlight of this film. Through interpreting the multiple spatial narratives in the film, the paper analyses the elements of reality criticism in the events, and unearths the profound social criticism and cultural reflection contained in the film.

KEYWORDS: Film review; Spatial narrative; Critique of reality; Geographical space; communication space; Psychological space

I. INTRODUCTION

“*Breaking*”, also called 892, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2022, where it won the Sundance Special Jury Prize and was released in the United States in August of the same year. The film is based on a true story with the prototype protagonist being a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who was killed in a bank robbery in 2017. The film's director tries to maintain an objective stance by providing a short biography of the last moments of Brian's life at the age of 33. An extraordinary striking outcome is achieved without exploiting intense conflicts, mysterious plots, fancy special effects, gory and violent sequences, which are techniques that are applied in ordinary films to attract audience, on the other hand by utilizing gently paced plots. “*Breaking*” is not about the fate of one person, but about the lives of millions of ordinary people and about the smallness and vulnerability of individual destinies in front of the seemingly fair and just system of American society. The presentation of this thought-provoking theme relies on the film's subtle spatial narrative.

II. SPATIAL NARRATIVE

Normally speaking, space is traditionally seen as the backdrop of plots, but the actual goal is not limited to this. It can also serve other narrative roles, such as the focus of attention, the bearer of symbolic meaning, the object of emotional investment and even the means of strategic planning (Marie-Laure, 2016). The reason why there are such rich expressive tensions is that space is not monopolized by geography, but from the perspective of art, humanities, psychology, and so on, invisible and metaphorical space can also be expanded in order to play the role of narration and interpretation together. In this film, there are three spatial narrative routes: the real geographic space, the communication space of human interaction, and the psychological space of the characters, which profoundly and effectively link the narrative form with the complexity of social life. These narrative spaces have not only their own positions, but also overlap and convergence of interrelated issues.

A. Real geographical space: identity crisis and self-seeking

The film opens with a narrative overhead shot pulling out the first real geographical space, that is the welfare office of the U.S. department of retired military affairs. The office was not a spacious setting, which was lined with people asking for a solution to their problems, and the protagonist, Brian, was escorted out into the hall by two security guards with his hands cuffed behind his back. The welfare office clerk, handing him the glasses he lost in the scuffle, left with a wistful sigh. People coming and going in the lobby looked on indifferently without paying much attention. The camera pushes from panorama to close up to see the bruises on the hero's face. The second narrative space, immediately following the development of plots, is the street from day to night. During the day, the square was filled with chatter, pigeon feeders, dancers and cello players. A group of cumulative montage shots renders the calm and quiet of a southern American city, except that underneath the calm there was a darkness. The film gives Brian a thoughtful medium shot, and then cuts to a close-up of a Newport cigarette in his hand and this cigarette was only smoked a few times before it was carefully twisted out and put back in the box. As night falls, Brian walking alone, helplessly and hopelessly drowned in the darkness.

Spatial Narrative and Critique of Reality in The American Film "Breaking"

The geospatial narratives of these two places are rather special in that they break the conventional narrative presentation. In general, when we want to introduce a character's image or identity, we will choose a space that is more closely related to the character and can fully demonstrate the developmental process or stage of people's growth, emotion, personality, and so on. Nevertheless, here we learn about the protagonist's identity through two unfamiliar public spaces, and just like the film's title "*breaking*", the two geographical spaces in the opening scene are where the protagonist is cut off from the two most basic and important identities he once possessed.

Based on the social status, Brian was a veteran who was stationed in Iraq twice and was honorably discharged. The U.S. discharge mechanism should provide the better arrangements both on subsidies and jobs. Even in cases such as Brian's subsequent diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, which quickly raised his disability from 5 per cent to 50 per cent, the rules should be well established. But Brian's complaint at the benefits office suggested otherwise. Brian had two jobs that were sufficient to support his family, but because of the severity of his condition, he had to quit his job and live entirely on \$892 monthly fee, which was his entire financial support and given by the department of veteran affairs. Then, under the department's cleverly worded regulations, he lost these financial compensations. Although America celebrates heroism and many films create hero myths, what kind of life a retired hero leads for the rest of his or her life is as much a hidden narrative as a fairy tale of a prince and princess in love told only up to the moment of the grand wedding. Brian used his own personal experience to tear open the fairy tale's façade and let everyone see the hero's poor and miserable life. He did not want anything more than this benefit he deserved for his disability status, which is not only his only source of finances, but also a confirmation of his identity. A hero who had once sacrificed his life for his country only could say to the clerk in a pleading tone, "Madam, don't take my money and then try to get rid of me, you'll put me on the street. I'm an adult, but I can't even feed myself".

According to his family's ethical identity, Brian was a husband and a father whose mental illness, caused by war-related injuries, makes him choose to divorce his wife to escape an imaginary enemy. Although he loved the family and his children, how could he take on his fatherly duties when he had no way to support himself? His daughter's request for a puppy made him have the overwhelming desire to fulfil his child's wish. With a reluctant smile, he discussed the name of the puppy with his daughter, and he clearly knew that he had no financial basis and could not even afford to pay the phone bill. When his child asked "why don't you charge a little more?", he was silent until the phone was cut off automatically because of unpaid bills.

Two spatial narratives that are not the main scene push Brian, who is in an identity crisis, in front of the audience. Wanting to reclaim the identity that was rightfully his, Brian decided to take the desperate step of going to the bank to take hostages, and next all of the rest of the main plot takes place in the enclosed space of the bank. He stood outside the bank, the battleground for his desperate attempt to reclaim his identity. The bank was half bathed in sunlight, half in the shade of trees, and Brian walked in the shadows all the time. After he passed the clerk at the bank counter a "I have a bomb" note, the film gives him an appropriate front and back shot and a slightly imperceptible tilt angle, which makes the opening of the heist seem not only less aggressive, but even a little more courteous. His demands were unthinkable; he wanted nothing but a polite request for the hostages to call the police immediately. While the man waited anxiously to be connected to 911, the bank was evacuated and the only people who left behind in the entire bank are a clerk, a lobby manager and two women. Because he robbed the bank in such a placid manner, even the customers who left first did not call the police.

Hijacking a bank was a realistic choice for Brian, probably because of the level of attention given to bank cases. But after the film's artistic processing, a real space like a bank is given a different meaning. Banks represent the order and rules of society, the cornerstone of the economic system and the guarantee of maintaining a functioning society, thus the symbolic meaning of stability and legal majesty that banks represent is self-evident. Although the bank in the film is not a skyscraper, it carries the arrogance of looking down on everything. The fact that Brian chose it as his target was a challenge and a break from the existing order, which was his battle strategy and also represented his courage to go for broke. Nevertheless, the protagonist, who claimed to be carrying a bomb, had no weapon at all since the beginning.

B. Interactive communication space: the thirst to be seen and heard

In today's American society, there are many avenues for an average person who wants to present themselves, be seen and heard. For instance, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook, etc. are all very quick ways. Despite all this, the real thirst is still obscured; who is really listening, and who is really being heard and seen?

Making phone calls is a successful method to expand into the more open space in an enclosed space like a bank. Over the course of three hours, there were countless calls back and forth. Two of these calls were important and rich in information and should not be neglected.

One was with the media. After the 911 operator angered Brian with his poor communication style, Brian for the first time lost his temper and yelled "I'm going to contact the news stations, tell them what's going on, get them to come on the scene, CNN, NBC, all the media outlets, tell them what's going on". Therefore, next there was a phone interview with reporter Lisa Larson of WSB-TV. In the conversation Brian discovered the reporter's perfunctoriness and lies. He angrily pointed out the station's despicable

Spatial Narrative and Critique of Reality in The American Film "Breaking"

nature that the TV station did not care about the hearts and needs of ordinary people and its attention was all on gathering fodder for topics that would bring profit.

The next call took place between Brian and the negotiator. It had to be admitted that Eli Bernard of the police department was very talented as a lead negotiator with a deep understanding of the human heart and the ability to be flexible in his tactics. He sympathized with Brian, accommodated Brian's dissatisfaction with the department of veteran affairs, and tried to make a breakthrough and win empathy by using a common identity of having served in the Marines, and then got to the point, "Sir please tell me how we're going to take this, and hand it back to the veteran affairs to handle it, instead of the bank employees". When Brian pessimistically stated that he was surely going to die here this time, Eli Bernard said firmly, "Sir, with all due respect, it's my responsibility to make sure you get out of here alive." Brian, who had suffered too many human trials and tribulations, conversely told the negotiator in a soothing tone, "I understand, I understand, but we both know they're going to kill me, and we both know that I'm going to die here. There's nothing but bullets waiting for me out there. But at least everybody will know, know what's going on at the veteran affairs, everybody will know".

There is a great deal of tragedy in this line, as Brian expressed desperation and hopelessness about his situation, understanding that he might be killed but still hoping to draw public attention to the problems of the veteran affairs by exposing them. He wanted to trade individual sacrifice for actually being seen and heard. The negotiator pressed, "How much does the department of the veteran affairs owe you?" "\$892.34." The string of numbers, which Brian knew by heart, exploded like a thunderbolt round the heads of everyone on the scene; this big, loud bank robbery had been for such a paltry sum. The negotiator said with sigh, "Sir, your honour is worth more than \$892!" This remark showed that the negotiator who seemed to be the closest to Brian's heart could not actually understand Brian. One was talking about the bottom line of survival and dignity, and meanwhile, the other was feeling sentiment and honour. Brian's core demand and the demand behind this number, that is justice and democracy, were being ruthlessly ignored. Brian said "I'm worthless, I'm nothing", and he degraded himself so much precisely because he was in this particular culture, system and social relations, without being able to feel his own existence. He decided to use the media and the government to uncover and show the truth that has been hidden. However, the communicators he selected were disappointing: the media was the centre of popular culture, but no one spoke for him; instead, they treated him as an information resource to be consumed and exploited; the governmental institutions were supposed to ensure the healthy functioning of a modern democratic order, but justice was not served and he was regarded as a disharmony factor and would be violently sanctioned. What is even more pathetic is that this is not an individual's plight, but the original sin of human society constructed by institutional civilization, where the individual is swallowed up and ignored by the social system. Ironically, at the end of the film, the news reporter was interviewed as if she were a hero. Reflexivity and empathy, the necessary cultural qualities of a civilized society, are absent here.

U.S. has always been proud of its own system, and believes that the system is perfect and even in the more backward cities of the South, a set of systems and processing mechanisms are watertight. This is like a solid barrier so that Brian cannot find the entrance to solving the problem. Man creates all kinds of civilized mechanisms and policies to serve man, but in fact, when man as the creator is confronted with a social system that appears in the name of science, he is left with the only option of obedience - man is reduced to a slave of the order. When a news reporter went to interview the woman in the benefits office of the U.S. department of veteran affairs after Brian was killed by the police, the film fell into a terrible silence, and the silence itself is undoubtedly a metaphor for the individual's loss of words in the face of the system. This time modern man's body and soul are surrounded and crushed by the civilized system.

C. Complex psychological space: lies of the world and conversion of the mind

Brian's name was added to the list of 236 mentally ill people killed by police in 2017 and this result is both infuriating and saddening. So was he really insane? Brian said, "People look at me like that all the time, thinking I'm stupid, thinking I'm retarded." But for the vast majority of the film, he came across as very rational and intelligent, and he uncovered two of the world's biggest self-defeating lies.

His ex-wife, including a TV reporter, objected to him exposing the darker side of society for his child to see, but Brian believed "she needs to know how the world treats people like us. I'm just letting her know that she's about to step into that world as well." Individuals go through a gradual process of socialization at a stage when they do not yet have recognized social and economic roles. Brian believed that children had the right to know more complex and real information about the world so that they were not overwhelmed when they suffered various blows in adulthood, but he was not trying to inculcate hatred and avoidance of the world in his children. He repeatedly taught his daughter to be kind and help others, and he hoped that, while understanding the dark side of society, his daughter could maintain her concern and empathy for others and improve and help them through her own behavior. With this dual emphasis on personal and social responsibility and this rational and calm attitude, it was really difficult to associate him with madness.

In addition, he was sobered by the lies of racism in the United States. One of the policies of the United States dedicated to changing race relations is called cultural color-blindness and it aims to maintain ethnic equity in different areas including social security. However, there is always a great distance between slogans and reality. When the negotiator assured Brian that "the money

Spatial Narrative and Critique of Reality in The American Film “*Breaking*”

will be there" and "you won't die", Brian calmly said "No, you don't have the right to control the scene either". As it turned out, Brian proved with his life that the negotiator, who was also a black man, was only an appendage of a huge bureaucratic organization and in this society, identities, roles and people themselves were disconnected.

Since secular systems have proven to be shaky, subversive and illusory, for Brian, religion is the only avenue that he uses to grasp reality. In the bathroom of the bank, he consoled himself as well as his clueless daughter on the other end of the phone, "It's going to be okay, can you pray with Daddy?" "I will speak to the LORD, who is my refuge, my God, and my dependence." Religion was his painful realization of his limited abilities. He was so conscious and aware of the world. His death was more like a sacrifice; he expected to be redeemed by his death and purified of the evils of the world at the cost of his life. The film uses several sets of metaphorical shots when dealing with such a psychological space detail, the cross next to the bloodstain, the bible in the backpack and the side view of the devotional prayers, all of which turn Brian's self-numbing into a self-explosion with a high degree of humanistic value, which is a release of greater energy.

CONCLUSIONS

It is regrettable that this film based on a news event, despite its profound critical significance, has not received the warmer attention it deserves. Some professional critics shied away from the theme of the film, focusing directly on the director's control of the camera and the performances of the actors (Pete, 2022), and some even said that this is not a documentary reenactment, but a tense drama (Peter, 2022), directly dissolving the film's realistic intervention against American society. However, we believe that video expression helps to shape the collective memory of the public sphere, and that one day it will help to draw people's reflection and critique of social civilization and human existence to a deeper and more complex level.

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